

The Jnana Bhoomikas



Bhagavan walking on Arunachala with his attendant.

I had planned to answer some pending queries from old threads today but I got sidetracked by my first reply, which was a response to Subramanian about the *saptha bhoomikas*. He mentioned these ‘seven stages of knowledge’ a few times in his replies to my post on how some *jnanis* seem to have more power than others. Since it is an interesting classification, I wanted to mention what Bhagavan himself had to say on this topic. When my reply moved into its third page, I decided to make a separate post out of it.

As Subramanian remarked, the *saptha bhoomikas* are mentioned in the *Yoga Vasishtha*. They also appear in other texts. Some of the categories in these works vary from list to list. In *Upadesa Manjari* (*Spiritual Instruction*), chapter four, Bhagavan answers questions about these *saptha bhoomikas*, which are also known as the *jnana bhoomikas*. In a footnote the seven items are defined in the following way:

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1. *subheccha* (the desire for enlightenment).
2. *vicharana* (enquiry).

3. *tanumanasa* (tenuous mind).
4. *satwapatti* (self-realisation).
5. *asamsakti* (non-attachment).
6. *padarthabhavana* (non-perception of objects).
7. *turyaga* (transcendence).

Those who have attained the last four *bhoomikas* are called *brahmavit*, *brahmavidvara*, *brahmavidvariya* and *brahmavidvaristha* respectively. ”



Sadhu Natanananda, the compiler of Upadesa Manjari.

A *Brahmavit* is one who has realised or known *Brahman*; a *Brahmavidvara* is one who is superior among the knowers of *Brahman*; a *Brahmavidvariya* is defined as ‘the best among the knowers of *Brahman*’ and *Brahmavidvarishtha* means ‘the very best among the knowers of *Brahman*’. These four terms in the final paragraph come from a similar explanation that can be found in the *Varaha Upanishad*.

The seven categories enumerated in *Spiritual Instruction* correspond exactly to a list in *Kaivalya Navaneetam*, a Tamil advaitic text. When Bhagavan was asked these questions in *Upadesa Manjari*, he was, in fact, being asked to comment on the version of the *jnana bhoomikas* that appears in *Kaivalya Navaneetam*. This is how that text defines and explains the various terms:

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The elders have analysed them [the *jnana bhoomikas*] as:

1. *Subheccha*: desire for truth.

2. *Vicharana*: investigation into the truth.
3. *Tanumanasi*: pure and attenuated mind.
4. *Sattvapatti*: the realisation of the truth.
5. *Asamsakti*: a detached outlook on the universe and its contents.
6. *Padarthabhavani*: untainted awareness of Self.
7. *Turiya*: the highest and indescribable state.

150, 151

1. To wean from unedifying associations and desire, knowledge of the Supreme is the first plane called *subheccha*.
2. To associate with enlightened sages, learn from them and reflect on the truth, is called investigation.
3. To be free from desires by meditating on the truth with faith, is the attenuation of the mind.
4. The shining forth of the highest knowledge in the mind owing to the development of the foregoing conditions, is realisation.
5. To be free from illusion by firm realisation of truth is the detached outlook on the universe.
6. The bliss of the non-dual Self, devoid of triads [knower, knowing, known, and so on] is untainted awareness of Self.
7. Sublime silence of the very nature of Self is *turiya*.

(*Kaivalya Navaneetam*, part two, verses 149-51) ”

The four levels of knowing *Brahman* that correspond to categories four to seven are discussed in the first part of *Kaivalya Navaneetham*:

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The wise, remaining like ether and liberated even here, are of four classes, namely *Brahmavid* (i.e. knower of *Brahman*), *vara*, *varya*, and *varishta*, in

order of merit.

95

The *Brahmavids* who by steadfast practice have gained clear realisation of *Brahman*, continue to perform even the hard duties of their caste and stage in life, exactly as prescribed by the shastras, for the benefit of others, without themselves swerving from their supreme state.

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Should passions rise up they disappear instantly and cannot taint the mind of the *Brahmavids* who live in society detached like water on a lotus leaf. They look ignorant, not showing forth their knowledge and remain mute owing to intensity of inward bliss.

97

Prarabdha, i.e. karma which is now bearing fruit, differs according to the actions of the persons in past incarnations. Therefore their present pursuits also differ among *jnanis* who are all, however, liberated even here. They may perform holy *tapas*; or engage in trade and commerce; or rule a kingdom; or wander about as mendicants.

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They would not think of the past or future; would partake of what comes unsolicited; would not wonder if the sun turned into the moon or at any marvel, whether the sky were to spread its shoots down like a banyan tree or a corpse were to be revived; nor would they distinguish good and bad, for they always remain as the unchanging witness of all.

99

Among the other three classes, the *vara* and the *varya* remain settled in *samadhi*. The *vara* feels concern for the maintenance of the body; the *varya* is reminded of it by others; the *varishta* never becomes aware of the body either by himself or through others.

100

Although there are distinguishing characteristics in the lives of the different sages, who are themselves very rare in the world, yet there is absolutely no difference in the experience of liberation. What can be the use of the hard won *samadhi*?

The *Brahmavid* who is outwardly active, seems sometimes to feel the misery of calamities whereas the others remain in unbroken bliss.

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Now if the *Brahmavids* live like the ignorant how are they free from the cycle of births, and how is their ignorance gone? The all-pervading ether remains untainted by anything; the other four elements are tainted by contact with objects. So it is with the *Brahmavid* and the ignorant. ”

Now, having given the necessary background quotes, I can give Bhagavan's views on this list, and by extension his opinions on whether some *jnanis* know *Brahman* better than others. The dialogue is from chapter four of *Spiritual Instruction*:

“ **Question:** To which of the seven stages of knowledge [*jnana-bhoomikas*] does the sage [*jnani*] belong?

Bhagavan: He belongs to the fourth stage.

Question: If that is so why have three more stages superior to it been

distinguished?

Bhagavan: The marks of the stages four to seven are based upon the experiences of the realised person [*jivanmukta*]. They are not states of knowledge and release. So far as knowledge and release are concerned no distinction whatever is made in these four stages.

Question: As liberation is common to all, why is the *varistha* [literally, the most excellent] alone praised excessively?

Bhagavan: So far as the *varistha*'s common experience of bliss is concerned he is extolled only because of the special merit acquired by him in his previous births which is the cause of it.

Question: As there is no one who does not desire to experience constant bliss, what is the reason why all sages [*jnanis*] do not attain the state of *varistha*?

Bhagavan: It is not to be attained by mere desire or effort. Karma [*prarabdha*] is its cause. As the ego dies along with its cause even in the fourth stage [*bhoomika*], what agent is there beyond that stage to desire anything or to make efforts? So long as they make efforts they will not be sages [*jnanis*]. Do the sacred texts [*srutis*] which specially mention the *varistha* say that the other three are unenlightened persons?

Question: As some sacred texts say that the supreme state is that in which the sense organs and the mind are completely destroyed, how can that state be compatible with the experience of the body and the senses?

Bhagavan: If that were so there would not be any difference between that state and the state of deep sleep. Further how can it be said to be the natural state when it exists at one time and not at another? This happens, as stated before, to some persons according to their karma [*prarabdha*] for

some time or till death. It cannot properly be regarded as the final state. If it could it would mean that all great souls and the Lord, who were the authors of the Vedantic works [*jnana granthas*] and the *Vedas*, were unenlightened persons. If the supreme state is that in which neither the senses nor the mind exist and not the state in which they exist, how can it be the perfect state [*paripurnam*]? As karma alone is responsible for the activity or inactivity of the sages, great souls have declared the state of *sahaja nirvikalpa* [the natural state without concepts] alone to be the ultimate state. ”

My feeling from reading these answers is that Bhagavan thought that the distinction between level-four *jnanis* and level-seven *jnanis* was an artificial one. As he remarked in one of his replies: ‘So far as knowledge and release are concerned, no distinction whatever is made in these four [higher] stages’. It is also interesting to note that his own preferred term for the highest state was not *Brahmavidvaristha* but *sahaja nirvikalpa samadhi*.

My conclusion that Bhagavan was somewhat dismissive of the apparent distinctions between these states is reinforced by his concluding remarks in *Vichara Sangraham* [*Self Enquiry*]:

“ Because of the grades in misery and happiness, the released ones, the *jivanmuktas* and *videhamuktas*, may be spoken of as belonging to four categories – *Brahmavid*, *Brahmavara*, *Brahmavariyan* and *Brahmavarishta*. But these distinctions are from the standpoint of others who look at them; in reality, however, there are no distinctions in release gained through *jnana*. (*The Collected Works of Sri Ramana Maharshi*, p. 35) ”

That is to say, the apparent distinctions between *jnanis* exist solely in the eyes of those *ajnanis* who want to categorise them.

The *varishta* state, the highest on the list, is traditionally regarded as one in which there is a lack of awareness of the body, combined with an experience of extreme bliss. Bhagavan himself experienced this state around the turn of the twentieth century when he was absorbed in the Self in the Arunachaleswara and Gurumurtham temples. He was not in a ‘higher’ state then; it was simply that his *prarabdha* had decreed that he should spend some time in a state of blissful Self-abidance in which he was completely unaware of either his body or the world. He himself has remarked that there was no change in his state or his experience from the moment when he realised the Self in Madurai in 1896.

I did not include this *jnana bhoomika* list in the ‘Power to Enlighten’ post because there is no indication in Bhagavan’s words that he felt that the distinctions between the top four stages of the *bhoomikas* were in any way connected with the ability to transmit grace and enlighten devotees. He says, quite clearly, that the *bhoomika* state one ends up in is a matter of *prarabdha*, but he does not say that those in the higher states have more power and more capacity to wake others up. The higher *bhoomikas*, if they are valid at all, are states of experience, rather than states that indicate how much transmitting power a *jnani* has.

I spoke to Papaji about *brahmavit*, *brahmavidvara*, *brahmavidvariya* and *brahmavidvaristha* soon after I went to Lucknow in 1993. I was curious to know what his take on this list would be.

His response was:

“ There are no knowers of *Brahman*. *Brahman* alone is. How can you have ‘better’ or ‘best’ knowers if the knower himself is not there? *Brahman* alone exists. No one knows it. *Brahman* is so alone, when *Brahman* speaks, there is not even anyone who knows or remembers what *Brahman* has said. ”

This conclusion is supported by Bhagavan’s comment in *Talks with Sri Ramana*

Maharshi, talk no 68: ‘How can one speak of him [the *jivanmukta*] as *Brahmavid* [a knower of *Brahman*]. *Brahman* can never be an object to be known.’

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